

The Market Makes the Decision:

A School Choice Model for Vermont

1992

Executive Summary

Around the country and throughout our state, education is a constant topic of conversation and concern. The education of young Vermonters is critical to sustaining our state's vitality. Educational reform that ensures an accessible, effective, productive education system is essential if we want to guarantee the state's strong financial foundation and treasured quality of life. Business leaders have become actively involved in education reform, and the message they bring is clear: *We must have a better educated workforce or we will suffer a rapid decline in our standard of living.*

Educators, administrators, business and community leaders, and parents are working together to effect the needed changes. We are reinventing our educational system. National and state goals have been set for restructuring and improving our schools. School choice is a major reform initiative that is being widely discussed at the national level; it has generated at interest among many Vermonters who are concerned with the quality of education. School choice allows students and their parents to decide which school to attend. School choice can include a number of options including selecting from among private and public institutions and permitting a student to take college-level courses during secondary school years.

School choice brings market forces of competition to the education system and can lead to improvements. Offering a choice enables the system to meet the needs of more students, increases a school's program flexibility, and creates a climate of innovation that will reward dynamic educators, reduce waste, and energize the system. It increases equality among students, strengthens current restructuring efforts, and allows families to take more control of and responsibility for their childrens' education.

The Vermont Business Roundtable's Education and Training Study Committee on School Choice began examining the concept of school choice in February 1991. The group studied working models of school choice, considered a variety of approaches, visited schools, consulted with educators, and debated the issue in depth. The committee agreed that, for a model of school choice to be viable in Vermont, the plan must fit Vermont's current education restructuring efforts, be equitable, include a strategy for increasing the quantity and quality of information that Vermont families have about schools, and offer a favorable cost-benefit ratio. The Vermont Business Roundtable believes that it has developed a viable and realistic model for school choice that meets these criteria.

School Choice and Vermont

School choice has the greatest chance for success where it is consistent with local history, values, and culture, and where it is complementary to other educational

innovations. Vermont has a modified version of school choice in place in the form of tuition towns. Since the 19th century, students who have lived in towns with no union or town high school have been given the opportunity to attend schools in Vermont and out of state, with their tuition being paid by their town. St. Johnsbury Academy, which has been one option for tuition-town students, is a Vermont example of the power of market forces in motivating improvement.

Allowing each Vermont student to select the school that is appropriate for his or her age and academic needs is consistent with the new directions that Vermont education has taken over the past few years.

A School Choice Model for Vermont

The challenge is to design a school choice program that will be effective and fair for all. We believe the model proposed by the Roundtable meets that challenge. This *School Choice Model for Vermont* is:

- Fair and balanced, favoring no single group or region-choice must be open to all, regardless of financial or geographic circumstance; the objective is improved student performance.
- Based on access to high-quality information-students and their families need to know the facts before choosing a school; an effective system for providing this information must be devised.
- Respectful of local schools and their communities-while school choice is designed to help schools improve, safeguards are needed to protect them against sudden and large-scale shifts in student population.

According to this model, any Vermont public or participating and approved independent educational institution that is eligible to accept public funds may be selected. Local school tax and state aid for education funds will follow the student to the school of choice with certain conditions and limitations, and will be applied to pay education costs at that institution. Similarly, special education funds will follow students with special needs. Transportation arrangements will be a shared responsibility of families and school system.

To ensure a smooth transition to a more open system, school choice should be implemented in phases. The model includes a schedule designed to protect against undue disruptions due to change.

School choice deserves the serious attention of interested Vermonters. This model is designed to benefit all students and their families. Vermonters are demanding changes in the education system. The Vermont Business Roundtable wants to see results. We believe that when designed for equity and high standards, school choice can provide the results we are seeking.

INTRODUCTION

Background: Focus on Education

The Vermont Business Roundtable, through its research and policy studies, is working to guarantee that a healthy economic climate is maintained for the state and that the cherished quality of life is preserved. All of the Roundtable's study projects have been related to this objective.

Education has been an ongoing focus of Roundtable study activity, and is clearly a significant factor in sustaining Vermont's prosperity. In 1989, the Roundtable report, *Vermont's Unspoken Danger: Educating Our Children for the 21st Century*, asserted that building a superior education system for the next decade is essential if Vermont wants to ensure economic vitality and continue its quality of life. The 1990 report, *Reward for Performance*, encourages excellence in the teaching profession.

This new report on the issue of school choice takes education reform a step further. Beginning in February 1991, the Roundtable Education and Training Study Committee on School Choice consulted with Vermont educators, studied models in other states, considered a variety of approaches, made visits to schools engaged in market-driven competition, and debated the issue in depth.

School Reform: A National Priority

We are currently in the midst of the longest period of school reform in our country's history. Many trace the current movement to the early 1980s when national reports described a troubling trend toward mediocrity in education.

During this time of reform, an evolving relationship between business leaders and educators has emerged. While early exchanges between the two groups were often characterized by charges and counter charges, increased communication has led to mutual respect. Educators have a much clearer idea of business's needs and the business community shows greater sensitivity to the complex and often contradictory demands placed on school professionals. Business leaders paint a graphic picture of a changed world and they are clear in their message: *We must have a better educated workforce or we will suffer a rapid decline in our standard of living.*

Educators across the country are responding by reinventing schools. School restructuring is more than rhetoric; for thousands of dedicated professionals, it is a commitment. Still, the pace of change must quicken because our expectations have changed in a fundamental way. *We know that we must plan for successful learning for all children.* This is a significant departure from the current system, which fails to educate great numbers of children each year. Our economy has decreasing opportunities for the poorly educated and we cannot continue to condemn millions of students to a life of failure.

To accelerate and focus restructuring, the nation's governors and President Bush have defined national education goals in a policy statement called *America 2000*. The document targets six areas for improvement: expand early childhood education; increase high school graduation rates; improve competency in core subject areas; make U.S. students first in mathematics and science; improve adult literacy and citizenship; and produce a drug-free school system. School choice is highlighted as one of 15 key strategies designed to achieve these changes.

Educational Change: The State Level

Similar changes are taking place in Vermont. Thousands of teachers and administrators have worked on curriculum reform, with many projects demonstrating positive results. Public School Approval (PSA) was implemented at the state level to assure acceptable educational opportunities for all Vermont students, and to set in motion a mechanism for school improvement statewide. This is an especially daunting task in a rural, sparsely populated state with a strong tradition of local control.

In the past several years, concern over Vermont achievement measurements resulted in action. The State Board of Education has established four goals for Vermont learners:

- Assume that every child is a life-long learner.
- Restructure the schools.
- Attract the best teachers and administrators.
- Create powerful partnerships with the community and businesses.

Partnerships have been developed among schools, administrators, business leaders, teachers, and parent organizations. Eleven schools have received restructuring grants from funds provided by corporations and the state legislature. The State Department of Education has initiated assessment projects that have received national recognition as pioneering efforts to establish reliable records of student achievement. Similar projects in curriculum and parent involvement are now underway, along with efforts to use educational technology as a tool for driving systematic change.

The difficulties of this decade must also be noted. Financing our school system has become a struggle, often resulting in school budget defeats. Many schools are overcrowded, yet lack funds for new buildings. School drop-out rates remain high and achievement still lags in spite of demands for a better educated, more capable workforce. While we are making strides in these areas, we still have considerable work ahead of us to meet our goal of excellence.

School Choice: New Opportunities

School choice allows students and their parents to decide which school to attend. A range of school choice options exist, from voucher systems, which give students a "ticket" to attend any school they wish, public or private, to programs that allow students to select from among public schools only and programs that allow high school students to take college courses for credit.

Choice will create a climate of innovation that will reward dynamic educators, reduce waste, and energize the system. This energy will help America regain its position of prominence in education and allow our businesses to compete successfully in world markets.

Why School Choice?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Market forces of competition will encourage improvement by rewarding successful schools.

- Accountability will be increased by focusing on results.
- Options for parents, students, and educators will be expanded, thus meeting the needs of more learners.
- Schools will have increased flexibility to offer choices within the school or to focus on particular programs.
- Parents will feel greater commitment to schools they have selected.

NATIONAL EXPERIENCE WITH SCHOOL CHOICE

Outside Vermont, a number of states and localities are already incorporating some type of school choice. These schools vary in the degree of choice they offer. Some allow parents to indicate preferences among a few schools (Boston), while others allow low-income students to attend private, non-sectarian schools (Milwaukee). One model encourages the formation of new schools that have a particular focus such as performing arts or environmental sciences (East Harlem). Kentucky plans to allow parents to transfer students if the local school does not meet new education guidelines.

In 1991, the Morrison Institute for Public Policy reviewed school choice programs in nine states: Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, Utah, and Washington. The report, *Open Enrollment/Educational Choice: A National Review*, showed some specific trends emerging:

- Eight of the nine states hold parents responsible for delivering students to a bus stop within the new district.
- Three of the nine states protect districts from losing an excessive number of students in a single year. Milwaukee permits no more than 1,000 transfers per year. In Iowa, no more than five percent of current students may transfer in the first year of inter-district choice; there is a ten percent cap in year two, and no cap in year three.

The desire for improved learning is consistent among these school choice programs. Equally important is their focus on racial balance and providing economically disadvantaged students access to a variety of options.

The East Harlem Program

This program has been in existence for the past decade, and has resulted in the establishment of 50 new programs in 23 buildings. Teachers with ideas for new programs are encouraged to carry out their plans and are given basic start-up resources. Families are provided with information that will help them make wise decisions.

Programs flourish when they meet student needs and are run effectively; less successful programs are phased out.

The East Harlem program is designed to help economically disadvantaged and minority students enjoy the same kind of school-client relationship that their more privileged counterparts experience at prestigious independent schools. Reports from these choice schools are positive and represent a complete reversal from the more common inner city example; students take their learning seriously, teachers are inspired because *they* planned the program, and administrators work consistently to create a positive communication system with parents. Choice has empowered teachers, parents, and students to improve conditions and learning opportunities. East Harlem schools, which were among the lowest achieving schools in New York, moved up to the middle of city schools in achievement since offering school choice.

The Minnesota Program

This program is offering parents and students some options as part of a wider strategy for improving school systems. First introduced by the Minnesota Business Partnership, and endorsed by the Governor in 1985 as part of a nine-point program for school improvement, school choice options have been offered in Minnesota for five years. In addition, the Minnesota Business Partnership has had an important influence on the development and implementation of the choice program.

Minnesota's implementation of school choice was based on the expectation that school officials would respond to the loss of even a few students by making needed improvements in their programs. Massive movements from one school to another have not materialized in the past five years, although there has been an increase each year in the number of students exercising the school choice option.

The Minnesota results to date are consistent with the expectations of school choice proponents. School choice programs have contributed to an increase in student aspiration levels (especially post-secondary), more students are using alternative programs to come back to school after dropping out, there is greater student satisfaction with school, and low-income students and students of color are using the choice options. The program has not been disruptive and it has targeted both disadvantaged students and those students who have had problems with school. The Minnesota program appears to be helping these students succeed in their education.

SCHOOL CHOICE AND THE VERMONT EXPERIENCE

School choice is likely to have the greatest chance for success in an environment where it is consistent with local history, values, and culture, where there are clear examples of market-driven choice, and where it is complementary to other educational innovations. For all of these reasons, Vermont is a fertile place to consider school choice.

Vermont has offered a modified version of school choice since the 19th century. About 25 percent of Vermonters live in towns with no union or town high school. Students from these towns attend schools in Vermont and out of state, at either public or non-sectarian independent schools. Tuition for the students is paid by the town and they

are therefore referred to as *tuition towns*. Thirty-six towns have similar arrangements for their elementary students.

For example, students in the towns of Mendon and Chittenden attend the Frederick Duclos Barstow School from kindergarten through grade eight. Since the towns do not have a program for grades nine to 12, these students and their families select from a variety of public high schools as well as out-of-state independent schools. Schools that want more students carefully consider Barstow graduates' needs and respond. Barstow students shop for a secondary school just as they will when making a post-secondary school choice.

This system of local funding for students at other schools works well for tuition town students and it has a long history of effectiveness. However, it is only available to one of four Vermont families. Vermonters who currently choose which school to attend are happy with the system; equity would suggest that this opportunity be shared.

School choice is also consistent with traditional Vermont values. For the past two hundred years, Vermonters have prided themselves on being self-reliant. We have been wary of plans to take decision-making power out of local hands. As a state, we have resisted school consolidation plans that would empower a few at the expense of individual rights. School choice would place the power for this singularly important decision in the hands of students and their families. We have a tradition of being good merchants and we know the power of consumer choice. With valid information, Vermonters can make choices that benefit themselves and cause the marketplace to respond. Our long experience with tuition students shows that this can be as true in the world of education as it is in commerce.

St. Johnsbury Academy: An Established Choice in Vermont Education

There is also a history of Vermont support for the private academies such as St. Johnsbury Academy. While these are not choices available to all, they are a well-known feature of Vermont education and are considered by many to be an important part of the cultural landscape.

St. Johnsbury Academy provides a good example of the power of market forces in motivating improvement. As a private academy, St. Johnsbury competes for students whose towns have no union high schools but the Academy is not guaranteed their attendance. In the early 1980s, the school faced programmatic and financial decline, which was reflected in reduced enrollment.

Led by a new headmaster, with participation from faculty, students, board, and alumni, the school established liaison committees, met regularly with local school boards, and developed financial controls on tuition. A commitment was made to expand the boarding program, recruit students from abroad, and bring back students from feeder communities by establishing a transportation system that would reach outlying areas. Staff development was enhanced by establishing a clear mission statement, developing an improved system of supervision and evaluation, adopting a curriculum development model, empowering department heads, and creating an improvement and reward system for faculty members. An accelerated program of building repair was started: new dormitories were opened, improvements to the library and theater were made, and a new arts building was erected.

St. Johnsbury is now in a very different place than it was nine years ago. Enrollment is up almost 25 percent since 1981. New programs such as Elderhostel and a summer English as a Second Language (ESL) program have been added and staff has been increased from 70 to about 90. Eighty-six percent of the faculty now either have master's degrees or are involved in master's programs. Current tuition is about average for Vermont high schools, while in 1981 the Academy's tuition was 30 percent above the state average.

St. Johnsbury Academy has just been recognized nationally for excellence, making it one of only 17 schools in New England to be so honored. While any objective observer will admit that significant differences exist between St. Johnsbury Academy and public schools (i.e., governance), enough similarities exist to make this case instructive.

Education Goals

School choice should benefit individual students but its potential effect is much broader. School choice can help motivate the faculty, administration, and school board to make significant improvements. Results from other states indicate that school choice can be used as part of a larger strategy to increase statewide school effectiveness and goals.

The goals adopted by the State Board of Education maintain that all students will be given a high-quality education; educating all Vermont students is the business of every Vermonter, not just professional educators. School choice would give more responsibility and ownership for the quality of education to the parents and students of our state for the first time.

Statewide Innovation

The Vermont Department of Education and the State Board of Education have taken the lead in several significant innovative state initiatives that could be strengthened when combined with school choice.

- **Portfolio Assessment:** Because Vermont has pioneered the use of portfolios in assessing mathematics and writing development at the fourth and eighth grade levels, we are ahead of many other states in defining desired results and being able to compare these results. A school choice system could use this information to help families identify schools with effective learning outcomes.
- **Core Curriculum:** When complete, thousands of Vermonters will have helped craft a Vermont core of learning, a document that defines the needs of learners for the 21st century and the kinds of instruction that will meet those needs. School choice options will help encourage schools to rise to new levels of performance to meet these standards since students will be freer to move to more successful schools.
- **School Development:** The University of Vermont and other institutions are cooperating with school districts in five regional School Development Institutes (SDI) which help schools design and implement strategic plans. SDI and other programs already in place can help administrators and faculty respond to the market forces that will be part of a Vermont school choice program.

A SCHOOL CHOICE MODEL FOR VERMONT

When designed for equity and high standards, school choice can act as a catalyst to encourage new approaches and increase parental involvement. There is a fit between school choice and Vermont's historical, cultural, and educational experience. Choice can help a school improve and earn the support of its students and their families. Clearly, school choice fits with the promising new initiatives that Vermont educators have been implementing over the past few years.

This *School Choice Model for Vermont* responds to the following assumptions:

- The plan must be fair and balanced favoring no single group or region. Choice must be open to all, regardless of financial or geographic circumstance. The objective is improved student performance.
- The plan must offer access to high-quality information. Students and their families need to know the facts before choosing a school; a system for providing this information must be devised.
- The plan must respect local schools and their communities. While school choice is designed to help schools improve, safeguards are needed to protect schools from sudden and large-scale shifts in student population.
- The plan must be consistent with Vermont's current education restructuring efforts.
- The plan must have a favorable cost-benefit ratio.

Program Definition

Each Vermont student (grades K-12), along with his or her parents, may select any eligible school appropriate for the student's age and academic needs.

School Eligibility

Any Vermont public or participating and approved independent educational institution that is eligible to accept public funds may be selected under this program.

Acceptance Requirements and Limitations

- All Vermont public schools must continue to accept all students residing within the school district who elect to attend their local school.
- Vermont public schools will be required to participate in this choice program up to the current enrollment capacity for each school.

- Eligible Vermont independent schools may participate provided they agree to accept a percentage of their students on the same non-discriminatory basis applied to Vermont public schools.
- Any school participating in this choice program must either accept all applicants, or select a percentage of applicants on an equitable and non-discriminatory basis (for example by lottery).

Parental Information

Schools will provide a comprehensive mechanism for parent education and involvement in school choice. Schools desiring to attract and retain students would have an incentive to collect and share data. This information could be made available to parents and students in a variety of ways, including:

- Establishing a statewide clearinghouse of information.
- Holding consumer fairs for parents and students sponsored by the State Department of Education.
- Videotaping school report nights; making copies available to interested families.
- Compiling comparison data showing high school completion rate, college attendance rate, course offerings, teacher-student ratios, faculty preparation, and successful school-to-work transitions.
- Comparing various school philosophies, methodologies, and portfolio results.
- Providing program information about curriculum, class size, before and after school programs, and counseling and other support services.

Transportation

School transportation in Vermont is complex due to the number of school districts, the great distances between schools, and the uneven degree to which students have access to a transportation system. Of Vermont's 98,000 K-12 students, two-thirds currently are bussed. Of the remaining 32,000, some walk to school and others must find their own means to and from school. *The School Choice Model for Vermont* recommends that:

- Families will assume responsibility for dropping off and picking up students at the nearest existing bus stop within the borders of the receiving school district, where the receiving district currently provides transportation.
- School choice would stimulate new transportation options such as:
Parental car pools in conjunction with commuting to work.
Private transportation in response to market demands.

Curriculum

State and federal requirements must be satisfied. School choice should encourage innovation and diversity while ensuring the consistency of quality in all programs. Since families will be able to compare schools and, for the first time, take action, a school would be well advised to allow significant innovation to take place. As we have seen nationally, the result of such innovation may mean exciting program in the sciences, arts, and humanities. For curriculum planners, school choice should mean a new emphasis on creativity.

Student Rights

Any school choice system must comply with legal requirements designed to protect students. Schools participating in a choice program must open themselves to all students as room permits. Where limits to access exist, selections must be made on an impartial basis (e.g., lottery). Special needs students are specifically protected under federal statutes that will prevail under this choice plan.

Funding

Local school taxes and state aid for education funds will follow the student to the school of choice and will be applied to pay education costs at that institution. Similarly, special education funds will follow students with special needs. Students and families will be able to select schools without fear of being locked out for financial reasons. All participating Vermont schools will calculate tuition based on the actual average cost per pupil.

Conditions of Funding

If the sending school's average cost per pupil is higher than that of the receiving school, the sending school will pay full tuition and keep any remainder. The receiving school may set its tuition up to maximum, which cannot exceed its average cost per student. Maximum tuition reimbursement for private schools will be limited to the statewide average cost per student.

In the case where the sending school's average cost per student is lower than the receiving school's tuition, one of three remedies may be applied to make up the difference:

- Families not eligible for free and reduced lunch programs will pay the difference in costs themselves.
- Sending towns whose tax rate is lower than the state average will pay the entire tuition for families eligible for free and reduced lunch programs.
- Where the sending town's tax rate is higher than the state average, the state assists families eligible for free and reduced lunch programs by making up the difference. State dollars spent in this way will come from existing state aid.

Post-Secondary Options

Special conditions would apply to the post-secondary options component which are different from the elements recommended for K-12 school choice. Post-secondary options allow qualified high school students to attend local post-secondary institutions for advanced course work. Students could apply to participating institutions for admission to non-sectarian courses or programs for high school and college credit. Admission criteria would be established by each post-secondary school. Vermont public and private post-secondary institutions would be eligible to participate, including schools that grant two-year associate degrees as well as four-year colleges and universities. Participation by the post-secondary institutions would be voluntary.

Funding of Post-Secondary Options

The amount of tuition reimbursement from the sending district would be derived from a formula based on the available cost per student in the sending district and the percentage of the student's total academic credits for the school year that are being taken at the post-secondary institution.

Implementation Strategy

A phased-in school choice program, which helps protect against undue disruptions due to change, is recommended in Vermont.

September 1993: Vermont public schools and interested independent schools K-12 participate in parental information and involvement programs; results to be shared immediately.

September 1994: Vermont Supervisory Unions offer intra-union choice.

September 1995: Vermont Supervisory Unions offer post-secondary option for high school students.

September 1996: Qualified Vermont schools engage in an inter-supervisory union K-12 choice system.

Maintaining Local Support

School choice in Vermont will provide opportunities for schools to explore new directions and be more creative in responding to the needs and interests of students and families. Schools that are out of touch with their communities may be at risk if they do not respond to initial losses of students. However, disruption on a grand scale is in no one's best interest. Therefore, the school choice plan would include a safety switch. If a school loses significant numbers of students very rapidly (e.g., 10 percent of total enrollment in one year), a cooling-off period may be invoked by the local administration or the State Department of Education. An inquiry would then be conducted with a series of non-binding suggestions to follow. This would stop a "run" on any school and would discourage the unlikely possibility of mass flight.

CONCLUSION

A review of national trends shows an openness to developing school choice options for families. Vermont's tradition of tuition towns is also compatible with this concept. We are not the first state to consider this approach and an examination of school choice at work elsewhere illustrates the possibilities while simultaneously dispelling the fears of choice as a precipitant to calamity.

We believe that the model outlined in this report deserves serious consideration by Vermonters. It has been designed to enhance options for all students and their families. We are confident that school choice will lead to greater quality in educational programs throughout the state. The Roundtable also recommends that in conjunction with the implementation of this model, the current system of school choice in tuition towns be grand-fathered in its existing form.

The Vermont Business Roundtable's *School Choice Model for Vermont* recognizes the need to maintain support for effective and improved local schools as well as the need for high quality consumer information for students and their families. This plan would place accurate and relevant school comparison information in the hands of people who depend on results the most: our state's families.

Schools that are working hard to restructure and invent new ways to educate students will see this plan as an opportunity to find new audiences and new resources. It is the intention of this model to further inspire dedicated professionals who are testing the limits of the current system and challenge them to go beyond today's boundaries. Finally, the model provides a timetable for implementation. The time for action has come.

We are in a phase of education development when new ideas seem welcome. We are also at a point where the state needs to decide its future. If we are to do more than commit ourselves and our children to mediocrity, dynamic and robust change needs to be the norm in our schools. This kind of change must transcend the education establishment and energize communities, businesses, families, and especially students. It is impossible for individuals to be enthusiastic when they feel their lives are controlled by default. People can only be at their best when they know they are acting out of choice. Making that a reality for Vermont's students is imperative.

Vermont Business Roundtable Study Committee on School Choice

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